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Paul Peyton
ASSIGNMENT EDITOR
Suzette F. Stalker
COMMUNITY
Michelle Le Poidevin
ARTS & EDUCATION

Horace R. Corbin
PUBLISHER
David B. Corbin
ASSISTANT PUBLISHER & SPORTS
Karen M. Hinds
OFFICE MANAGER

Fred K. Lecomte
MARKETING DIRECTOR
Michael L. Bartiromo
MARKETING PRODUCTION
Robert P. Connelly
OPERATIONS & LEGALS
Ben Corbin
SERVICES

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P. O. Box 368
Scotch Plains, N.J. 07076

Tele: (908) 232-4407 • E-mail: editor@goleader.com • Web: www.goleader.com • Fax: (908) 232-0473

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21st District News Property Tax Convention Can't Ignore Spending

Assemblyman Eric Munoz, Summit

Once again this year homeowners will likely pick up the newspaper and read how their property taxes have gone up by record amounts. Of course, one need not read about it in the newspaper. They can see in their own checkbooks the ever-increasing toll that rising property tax bills are taking on their finances each year.

To New Jersey homeowners it must sound like a broken record. Every year the newspapers report record increases in property tax rates and every year Trenton promises to do something to fix the problem. Unfortunately, the past three budget cycles have yielded no solution and little relief. Finally, this year it appeared that a real long-term solution could be on the horizon. The Legislature had appointed a task force to look at a new approach to resolving the property tax crisis.

The 15-member Property Tax Convention Task Force recently met to study New Jersey's property tax crisis and to determine whether our state should hold a constitutional convention to address the property tax issue.

I have been supportive of the idea of a property tax convention because I believe it will provide the foundation for the fundamental, structural change that is necessary to actually lower our state's reliance on property taxes.

Holding a convention with delegates elected just one time for this purpose, will remove some of the political pressures that exist in the legislative and executive branches and provide the flexibility and independence necessary to come up with a real solution.

The convention task force has issued a report recommending a constitutional convention that would take place next year, with the election of delegates to take place this year. That proposal must first be ratified by the Legislature and put on the ballot this November.

Unfortunately, the task force has recommended a convention that would ignore the one key component that could make this process successful: a new approach to how government spends money.

The task force recommendation would only allow the convention to study revenue questions — not the all-important spending issues at the heart of this crisis. There was significant testimony during this process advocating that both spending and revenue be on the table for consideration by a convention.

I believe that consideration of spending issues is essential to solving the prop-

erty tax crisis. The underlying cause of our property tax problem has been wasteful, runaway spending by the state and a lack of adequate controls on spending in some municipalities and school districts.

The New Jersey State Budget has increased 17 percent in the last year and we have nearly doubled our state debt in the last three years from \$16 billion to \$29 billion. This must stop!

Like my colleague Assemblyman Kevin O'Toole, who served on the task force and issued a dissenting report, I believe this convention should have been free to study and revise the way we approach school funding, state borrowing, government spending caps or the need to eliminate government waste.

If a property tax convention fails to address these spending issues, it will be left only to increase taxes or shift the tax burden approaches that have repeatedly failed to provide long-term property tax relief in the past.

A property tax convention can serve as a catalyst toward finding the solution to this problem. And despite the shortcomings of the current property tax convention proposal, I intend to participate in this process.

I remain hopeful that as the Legislature sets the ground rules for this convention the spending side of the equation will be put back on the table for consideration. There are few more important issues facing our state than how to relieve the property tax burden.

As New Jersey's tax burden grows it becomes less and less affordable for young families, seniors and businesses to afford living or working here. We must address the property tax crisis once and for all and we must do so in a comprehensive, credible, and lasting manner.

Luckily the task force report serves mainly as a starting point for this process. I intend to be active in this process as we move forward so that I can help ensure that we do the best job possible of creating a convention that might actually come up with a solution to our property tax problem.

The people of New Jersey shouldn't have to wait for a solution to this problem any longer.

State Assemblyman Dr. Eric Munoz, of Summit represents the 21st Legislative District. He is a trauma surgeon and a professor of surgery at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey (UMDNJ).



Below are four arcane words, each with four definitions — only one is correct. The others are made up. Are you sharp enough to discern this deception of diction?

If you can guess one correctly — good guess. If you get two — well-read individual. If you get three — word expert. If you get all four — You must have a lot of free time!

All words and correct definitions come from the board game Diction Deception.

Answers to last week's arcane words.

1. Lucifugous — Avoiding light; nocturnal
2. Griffe — The child of Negro and mulatto
3. Sclerogenous — Becoming thick or hard
4. Thanatophidia — Poisonous snakes

TID

1. A gentle tapping
2. To wash or clean
3. Tender; soft
4. To fuss or complain

THRUM

1. To cast aside; throw out
2. The row of thread ends left on a loom when the web is cut off
3. To fill too full; pack tightly
4. In nautical usage, to strap about; to fasten round

TERCEL

1. The male falcon
2. Paper or tapestry for a wall
3. A marble used to shoot with; it is usually large and fancy
4. A large edible sea fish related to the cod

SANSSOUCI

1. Without doubt; certainly
2. Hopeless; discouraged
3. Fish soup
4. Without cares or worries

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Mulching Leaves, Taking to Conservation Center is Unacceptable

Dr. Robert Harvey's "solution" to our impending leaf disposal problem in 2005 is to require those residents who do not use a lawn service to either haul the leaves to the conservation center themselves, or to turn the leaves into mulch by simply making "a few more passes" of their lawnmowers over the leaves.

Both alternatives are unacceptable and unworkable. Perhaps Dr. Harvey hasn't noticed the huge mountains of leaves sitting in front of most homes during leaf-raking season, waiting to be removed. To suggest that residents can reduce these huge quantities into mulch with a few passes of a lawnmower is simply unrealistic.

Bagging the leaves for the town to remove, or otherwise hauling them to the conservation center, is likewise unreasonable because the huge amount of leaves would make the task unduly burdensome for many people. Ours is a leafy town, and the trees are part of what makes Westfield attractive.

To the extent that trees add to the ambiance and character of the town, they are an asset that everyone enjoys. If trees benefit the town as a whole, then the burden of cleaning up the fallen leaves should be shared by homeowners and the town government alike.

The current system of leaf disposal seems to be a fair compromise: I rake the leaves into the gutter, and the town picks them up at taxpayer expense. Although I have always regarded the yearly ritual of leaf raking as an unavoidable chore, it will become a dreaded, labor-intensive, time-consuming project if I'm now forced to bag mountains of leaves, mulch them, or haul them off to the conservation center.

Suddenly, all those trees will begin to look like a nuisance that must be dealt with. Although I don't advocate cutting down any trees to "solve" this problem, it's not surprising that some people might consider doing so. And I shouldn't be forced to hire a lawn service for hundreds of dollars as the only practical way of avoiding this nightmare.

If we want to have trees, we need to be able to get rid of the leaves in the fall without turning the task into a major ordeal.

It used to be that people simply burned the leaves, but of course that creates air pollution. The state now says that the leaves are sitting in the gutter too long, clogging the storm drains and "flavoring" the runoff. There are only two viable solutions: either the town will have to come up with a way to collect the leaves from the gutter in a timely manner, or it will have to find a loophole in the new regulations.

If neighboring towns need to share resources or otherwise get together to come up with ways to solve this problem in a manner that is not unduly burdensome on homeowners, I hope they will get started soon so that the solution is in place by October.

Bob Pinheiro
Westfield

People Over 35

ANONYMOUS — People over 35 should be dead. Here's why.

We drank water from the garden hose. We ate cupcakes, bread and butter, and drank soda pop with sugar in it, but we were never overweight because we were always outside playing.

We had friends! We went outside and found them. We played dodge ball, and sometimes, the ball would really hurt. We fell out of trees, broke bones and there were no lawsuits. We had fights and learned to get over it.

Little League had tryouts and not everyone made the team. Some students weren't as smart as others, so they failed. Tests were not adjusted for any reason.

Our actions were our own. The idea of a parent bailing us out if we broke a law was unheard of. This generation has produced some of the best risk-takers and problem solvers and inventors, ever. The past 50 years have been an explosion of innovation and new ideas.

People under 30 are WIMPS.

From Whitewater to Westfield: Michael Chertoff Now Heads Homeland Security

President George W. Bush nominated Judge Michael Chertoff, formally of Westfield, to be the Secretary of Homeland Security on Tuesday, January 11.

"He's been confirmed by the Senate three times. In all of his roles, Mike has shown a deep commitment to the cause of justice, and an unwavering determination to protect the American people. Mike has also been a key leader in the war on terror. On September 11, 2001, he was managing the Criminal Division of the Department of Justice, an 800-person operation devoted to enforcing our nation's criminal laws. In the days after September 11, Mike helped trace the terrorist attacks to the al Qaeda network. He understood immediately that the strategy on the war on terror is to prevent attacks before they occur. His energy and intellect put him at the center of many vital Homeland Security improvements, especially increased information sharing within the FBI and with state and local officials," said President Bush. "Mike is a talented and experienced public servant. In his stellar career, he has been a judge on the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit; he's been an Assistant Attorney General of the United States; he's been the U.S. Attorney for New Jersey, a federal prosecutor in New York City, and a law clerk to Supreme Court Justice William Brennan."

In 2001, Mr. Chertoff was featured in *This Is Westfield* because even then we knew he was something special. And now, he has a big job helping to defend this nation — something special indeed.

After his tenure from 1990 to 1994 as United States Attorney concluded, Mr. Chertoff and his family were looking to move from their Mountainside residence to a new home.

"We knew Westfield, we patronized the stores,

we had friends who lived there," he told *This Is Westfield*.

So in the mid-1990s, Mr. Chertoff and his wife Meryl, settled on the north side of town. Calling Westfield "a wonderful town," Mr. Chertoff said he likes the town for several reasons.

"There is a warm, wonderful group of people here. We have a lot of friends here," noted Mr. Chertoff. Mr. Chertoff was a native of Elizabeth and now resides in Bernards Township.

For approximately 10 years, he shouldered the responsibilities of federal prosecutor for New Jersey and the southern area of New York. During that time, Mr. Chertoff collaborated with the Customs Service while investigating cases involving money laundering, narcotics trafficking and export control violations.

Mr. Chertoff was also responsible for overseeing probes into organized crime and white collar crime. From 1991 to 1994, he participated in some of the top levels of the Department of Justice while serving as a member of the Attorney General's Advisory Committee of United States Attorneys.

From 1995 to 1996, he took the helm and made headlines as Republican Counsel to the Senate Whitewater Committee, investigating the Whitewater real estate transaction.

In that role, which he held for approximately 13 months, Mr. Chertoff confronted the current New York State Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton and others, asking the toughest questions.

In October 2000, he agreed to aid the Senate Committee in analyzing New Jersey police documents in order to determine the involvement by Former New Jersey Attorney General Peter Verniero in racial profiling throughout the state.

We're proud of Mr. Chertoff — confident and thankful.

It's Not Too Early to Consider Running For the School Board

Now that the new year has begun, it is not too soon to start looking at this year's school elections in Westfield, Scotch Plains-Fanwood and Mountainside. Although the deadline to file nominating positions is at 4 p.m. on Monday, February 28, the planning process should begin shortly for potential candidates. School elections will be held Tuesday, April 12.

In order to serve on a local school board, a candidate must have one year's residency in the district and, of course, be both an American citizen and a registered voter. A candidate can not have a claim against or have a contract with the district they are running for office. Members of the current municipal governing body can not serve as school board members. A minimum of 10 signatures are required on nominating petitions which can be picked up in the business office of the respective school district.

In Westfield this year, the seats occupied by Arlene Gardner, Alice Honeycutt and William Ziff are up for reelection. The terms of Edward Saridacki, Jr. and Trip Whitehouse, both of Scotch Plains and Susan Dyckman of Fanwood expire in April on the Scotch Plains-Fanwood Board of Education. In Mountainside, the seats of Peter Goggi and John Standish Perrin are up for grabs this year.

The past few years have not seen the enthusiasm of persons wanting to run for local school board seats as was the case in the mid-1990s. Serving on the local school board is and should be a noble service.

School board members are the policy makers who make the difficult decisions on the type of curriculum that will be taught in our schools. They also vote on capital expenditures that impact the maintenance of school buildings for years to come, and of course they have a say on the hiring of teachers and school administrators. Those persons who are elected to a school board for the first time are required under state law to attend a New Jersey School Boards Association training program.

Candidates are invited to attend a school board candidates briefing at North Brunswick High School on Monday, March 21, at 7 p.m. The program is sponsored by the New Jersey School Boards Association and the county school board associations. This session is for Hunterdon, Mercer, Middlesex, Monmouth, Somerset and Union counties. For information, please call (877) 294-6418.

Serving on a school board requires many hours of one's time each month at board and standing committee meetings. School board members need to be informed on complex policies, legal matters, legislation and labor contracts. They also work closely with school administrators, staff, Parent-Teacher Organizations and parents. School board members need to be able to listen to the public while also defending the policies of the school board.

This year we hope to see more local residents apply for school board candidacy. The decisions the school board make today can have a positive impact on the lives our children for years to come.

Letters to the Editor

Former Freeholder Mingo Thanks Residents for Opportunity to Serve

In 1998, the Plainfield and Union County Democratic Parties entrusted me to wear the party's banner. You, the residents of the City of Plainfield and Union County, then entrusted me to represent you on the Union County Board of Chosen Freeholders by electing me in 1998 and re-electing me in 2001. With very little practical political experience, this awesome responsibility became one of the most challenging and rewarding opportunities ever afforded me.

When I asked both of my chairpersons, Assemblyman Jerry Green and the Honorable Charlotte DeFilippo, what was expected of me, they informed me that I was charged with assisting my fellow freeholders with setting policies, establishing directions, and governing the administration of Union County government.

As a part-time elected official, I could do as much, or as little, as I felt was necessary to accomplish those objectives. Because I was retired and had the time to give and an unfulfilled desire to serve, I chose to be a full-time freeholder. I will never regret it.

In 2003, the leadership of my local Democratic Party changed and had a desire to go in a different direction. As a result, I made a decision to not run for reelection in 2004. Again, I have no regrets. Seven years on the Union County Board of Chosen Freeholders provided me with the opportunity to serve people in a manner I seriously doubt I would ever have had under any other circumstances.

Early in my tenure, I made a conscious decision to use my position in county government to be a servant of the people. I worked very hard to do just that, and whether or not I accomplished my goal to make a difference in people's lives, I have personally grown and benefited immensely from the relationships that I developed with the people I met and was permitted to serve.

I am more than grateful that I had the chance to be a Union County Freeholder. I am so proud of the many initiatives that

were accomplished during my tenure. I am a firm believer that the measure of a people can be viewed in the manner in which they care for their young people and their seniors.

By providing funding to open a Magnate High School and a full-time Vocational Technology High School, provide internet access in all Union County public high schools and libraries, train public high school teachers in technology, expand the College for Teens summer program to all Union County public high schools students, provide two-year scholarships for Union County students that attend Union County College, this Board has shown its commitment to our youths.

Declaring 1998 as the "Year of the Seniors," by providing free tuition at Union County College for senior citizens, free 15-passenger buses for senior centers, and funding for senior centers to assist in the purchase or renovation of their buildings, the Board showed its commitment to our senior citizens as well.

These initiatives, along with funding for municipal playground equipment and improvements, creation of a recreation trust fund, and offering a discounted prescription drugs program, meant a great deal to me because they improved the "quality of life" for our young people and our senior citizens. As the freeholder liaison and advocate for seniors and young people, my desire to serve is closer to fulfillment.

Again, I wish to thank all of the residents of the County of Union for permitting me to serve you for the past seven years. I also wish to thank Assemblyman Green and Chairwoman DeFilippo for their support and mentorship. I will always cherish and nurture my memories of this very special experience. I was truly blessed by it and I hope all of you were also.

My wife, Pansy, and I wish everyone a happy, healthy and blessed new year.

Lewis Mingo, Jr.
Plainfield

Optimist Club Thanks Community For Help in Delivering Food Baskets

On December 18, 32 members of the Optimist Club of Westfield delivered Holiday Food Baskets to 88 families in Westfield. This is the 15th year the Optimists have reached out to the Westfield community with donations of food during the holiday season. Because of an unprecedented level of community interest and involvement, twice as many food baskets were delivered this year than any year in the past.

Each family received a turkey, cider, fresh fruit, yams, cranberries, a pie and all the fixings. In addition, they received flowers, a box of candy, a holiday greeting card and a candle. Children under 10 received a teddy bear dressed in holiday clothes.

The Optimists would like to acknowledge the continued support of Kings in Garwood as well as several merchants in Westfield for their annual support, the Salvation Army for donating the teddy bears, the Westfield Newcomers for decorating the bears, Edison Intermediate students for fundraising, the staff at Westfield High School for their contributions and the many individual Optimists and their friends who made individual contributions. This was truly a community project!

Finally, thanks to Optimist Thom Hornish for his chairmanship and continued commitment to this project.

Michael Walsh
Chapter President
Optimist Club of Westfield

Former Children's Librarian Thanks Town for Support Over Past 18 Years

Having resigned from the Westfield Memorial Library on December 31 after 18 years as the children's librarian and assistant librarian, I would like to extend my thanks to the thousands of children who listened to stories and became eager readers, and to the parents and caregivers who made the library a family destination.

I would also like to thank the teachers

who assigned books as well as Websites to their students, to the Library Friends whose volunteer efforts brought special events to young audiences and to the library staff who work behind the scenes and at public desks to put wonderful books in the hands of children each and every day.

Carol Ann Wilson
Westfield

